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The Soviet Presence in the Arab World

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THE basic policy of the Soviet Union toward the three principal sectors of the Arab world—the Arab-Israeli, the Persian Gulf-Arabian Peninsula, and the North African—has continued unchanged during the past year or so. Despite its continuing military intervention in Afghanistan, anxiety over the simmering crisis in Poland, uncertainty in relations with the United States, and serious economic difficulties at home, the Soviet Union shows no diminution of interest in improving its position in the Arab world and in undermining United States policy there. It demonstrates caution, persistence and a readiness to expand commitments to the extent necessary for forging closer ties with prized Arab clients.

Over the past generation, Soviet interests in the Arab world have changed strikingly. In the late 1940's and 1950's they were primarily defensive, geared to weaken the military network of interlocking alliances that the United States was creating to contain the Soviet Union; by the 1960's and 1970's, in response to local conditions and growing Soviet power, Soviet interests became more ambitious and expansionist in character. The underlying rationale was strategic. However, Soviet interest in each sector of the Arab world developed independently, responding to a changing combination of security considerations, regional dynamics and rivalry with the United States. What is likely for the 1980's is a sustained Soviet effort to pursue a "forward policy" throughout the Arab East.

Several generalizations about the continuities and changes in Soviet policy in the Arab world can be derived from the U.S.S.R.'s overall record.[1] The continuities are conspicuous. First, the Soviet Union pursues a differentiated policy that is sensitive to constraints and opportunities. The selection of targets, the composition of aid packages, the willingness to subordinate Soviet desires to a courted country's preferences and the businesslike fashion in which most agreements have been carried out, irrespective of occasional policy disagreements, bespeak a sound perception of priorities and approach. Like Premier Nikita Khrushchev, President Leonid Brezhnev has managed to accommodate to the mutual contentiousness of the Muslim rivals. Thus, he has maintained good relations with both sides in the quagmires of Arab politics, for example, in quarrels between Syria and Iraq, Iraq and Iran (a Muslim but not Arab state), the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), and Kuwait and Iraq.

Second, strategic considerations and not ideological preferences have shaped Soviet diplomacy. Neither the Shah's conservatism, Sadat's de-Nasserization, Qadaffi's brand of fundamentalism, nor Yasir Arafat's unpredictable violence has deterred Moscow's quest for closer ties.* In all instances, local Communists have been expendable.

Third, the Soviet Union has been a reliable patron-protector. It shielded prime clients from defeat at the hands of their pro-United States opponents, even though this at times required Moscow to give way to a client's desires and often resulted in unwanted tensions with the United States. The U.S.S.R. re-equipped the Egyptian and Syrian armies after the 1967 June War; protected Nasser in 1969-1970 during the war of attrition along the Suez Canal; backed Sadat in the 1973 October War; and acquiesced in Syria's military intervention in Lebanon in 1976.

The Iraqi-Iranian war that started on September 22, 1980, has sorely tried the allegiances of the Soviet Union in its efforts to play the role of "honest broker" and to uphold, minimally, its commitment to Iraq in line with the 1972 friendship treaty, while at the same time trying to improve relations with Iran. Though linked by treaty to Iraq, Moscow senses that the larger, economically more important and strategically pivotal Iran could well fall into its waiting grasp; so it moves carefully, trying to retain leverage over both countries.

Fourth, Moscow has not been averse to intensifying local arms races. It knows that arms are its principal attraction for anti-Western Arab leaders. Whatever political leverage and military advantage it can obtain

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*Iranian Shah Mohammad Riza Pahlevi, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Libyan leader Muammar Qadaffi and Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat.

[1]For elaboration, see the author's "The Evolution of Soviet Strategy in the Middle East," *Orbis,* vol. 24, no. 2 (Summer, 1980), pp. 332-337.

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from Arab clients derive from its ability to provide them with the weapons they need to retain power and thwart their United States-backed rivals.

Finally, running through Soviet policy and interest in the Arab East is the central aim of eroding the United States position and influence. There is no confusion in Moscow: the United States is the Soviet Union's main adversary. Moreover, the Soviets correctly conclude that the United States aim is to keep them out of the region. Accordingly, derangement of the American position, not rapprochement, is the key to Soviet strategy in the Arab world.

Apart from these continuities in Soviet behavior, the new dimensions in Moscow's policy that have emerged clearly since the October War deserve brief mention. First, the Soviet Union has shown a greater ability and readiness to project military power into areas of opportunity. Soviet involvement in Ethiopia, Angola and the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 all brought political advantage to Moscow's clients.

The U.S.S.R. is now in an excellent position, militarily as well as geographically, to exploit future upheavals and regional conflicts. A recently published British defense study stressed that the Soviet Union is "plainly ready to apply force in support of political aims" and that it uses the formidable military power at its disposal to exploit unrest in the world.[2] The Soviet Union's confidence in its military might, its conviction that the "correlation of forces" favors the Soviet bloc, its perception of United States self-doubt and the domestic fetters on Washington's ability to turn to the military option, and its toleration of the variability of Arab political allegiances, all tend to reinforce the position of Soviet leaders who urge greater boldness in situations of opportunity.

A second important change, a direct result of the greatly increased Soviet military capability, is Moscow's pursuit of a slightly more venturesome policy than heretofore. Moscow is running higher risks for regional gain, accepting the international costs and consequences, and doing so irrespective of the effect on its relationship with the United States. (The case of Afghanistan is a prime example.)

Moscow is playing a shrewd game of diplomatic roulette in the Arab world. Like a seasoned gambler, it backs several numbers at the same time, hoping to parlay a small stake into a big payoff and prevent the United States from coming out ahead. Its general approach relates to the specific circumstances that it faces in each of the three sectors of the Arab world.

SYRIA

With the exception of the period from 1958 to 1961, when Syria merged with Egypt to form the short-lived United Arab Republic, the Soviet Union and Syria have had an active and ongoing relationship since the mid-1950's. Syria attracted strong Soviet support for several reasons: its resistance to membership in any Western-sponsored military pact; its radical, secular political aims and opposition to West-leaning Arab monarchies; its bitter opposition to the state of Israel; its strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean; and its pro-Moscow Communist party. In 1967, Moscow's interest in Syria led it to exaggerate the threat of an Israeli attack and inadvertently to trigger the seqence of events that culminated in the Arab-Israeli war and crushing defeat for the Arabs.

After the June War, Moscow became deeply involved in the military buildup and preparations of Syria (as well as Egypt). Soviet advisers trained the Syrian armed forces, modernized their tactics, and prepared them for the October War. During the war, the Soviets supplied the Syrians, served in various capacities on the battlefield, and shielded them from another defeat by the Israelis.

The falling out between Egypt and Syria over Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's turn from Moscow to Washington and his willingness to negotiate a settlement with Israel had the effect of nudging Syria into closer alignment with the Soviet Union. In March, 1976, Sadat unilaterally abrogated the 1971 Soviet-Egyptian friendship treaty, effectively ending Soviet influence in Egypt. To offset this defeat, Moscow supplied Syria with enormous quantities of advanced weaponry and openly encouraged the anti-Sadat Arab coalition that Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) worked to forge. Opposition to Sadat's policy of seeking an end to the debilitating and costly cycle of Arab-Israeli wars was made possible by Soviet arms, with which Moscow sought to make itself indispensable to the Arab confrontation states and to entrench its position in the Arab world.

Over the years, liberal Soviet economic aid has been important to Syria, which is dotted with Soviet-built projects, like the Euphrates Dam, a major undertaking comparable to the help it gave Egypt with the Aswan High Dam. In addition, Soviet specialists charted the country geologically, discovering deposits of iron and manganese.

However, relations between Moscow and Damascus were never without problems. Domestically, the dominant Baath party of Syrian President Hafez Assad refused the Communists any significant role in Syrian politics, and Assad felt threatened by Communist opposition to his periodic attempts at reconciliation with Saudi Arabia. Politically, Assad refused to grant Moscow the full use of military bases in Latakia and Tartus, and he resisted Soviet importuning to sign a treaty of friendship and cooperation. And diplomatically, Moscow was cool to Assad's flirtation with the United States and his ambitions in Lebanon.

Tensions developed over Syria's invasion of Leba-

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[2]Quoted in *The Baltimore Sun*, April 16, 1981, p. 6.

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non on May 31-June 1, 1976, in support of the Christian forces and against the PLO and the Lebanese Left. *Pravda*, the Soviet Communist party newspaper, castigated Syria's action, calling it "a knife in the back" of the Palestinians.[3] Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin, who visited Damascus on the eve of the Syrian intervention, found himself confronted with a fait accompli. For a time, Moscow halted arms shipments as a sign of dissatisfaction, but resumed them after Assad's visit in early 1977, obviously backing away from a showdown that might jeopardize Soviet relations with Syria and lead to an Egyptian-style expulsion of Soviet personnel.[4] Though dissonance over Lebanon and arms shipments persisted, Syria and the Soviet Union were drawn together by their opposition to Egypt and the United States.

Sadat's dramatic visit to Jerusalem in November, 1977, the ensuing Camp David peace process, and the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty on March 26, 1979, led Moscow and Damascus to mute their disagreements. The anti-Sadat Steadfastness Front, whose natural leader is Syria, assures Moscow of a convenient link to the Arab-Israeli dispute, though Soviet leaders want Arab opposition to remain political rather than military.

Growing domestic opposition stemming from ethnic and religious sectarianism has forced Assad into a closer political relationship with Moscow. Assad's tightly knit, secretive leadership is primarily Alawite, members of a Shiite Muslim sect representing only about 10 percent of the Syrian population, which is predominantly Sunni, the orthodox mainstream of the Islamic religion. The military high command, the praetorian secret police, and the all-powerful Regional Command of the Baath party are controlled by the Alawites. Assad's rule has been plagued also, in recent years, by widespread corruption, economic difficulties and growing dissatisfaction with the cost of sustaining a 30,000-man army of occupation in Lebanon.

On October 8, 1980, Assad gave the Kremlin the treaty it had sought for almost a decade. In Moscow, the U.S.S.R. and Syria signed a 20-year treaty of friendship and cooperation, effective December 2, 1980. Similar in the main to Soviet pacts with Iraq (April 9, 1972), Somalia (July 11, 1974), Afghanistan (December 5, 1978), and the PDRY (October 25, 1979), the treaty has something for each party.[5]

A few key provisions may be noted. Article 5 calls for "regular consultations," but does not elaborate. Article 6 says that in the event of "situations jeopardizing peace or security of one of the parties, or creating a threat to peace," both sides "shall enter without delay into contact with each other with a view to coordinating their positions and to cooperating in order to remove the threat that has arisen." Article 7 calls on the two parties to cooperate "in assuring conditions for the preservation and development of the social and economic accomplishments of their peoples." According to one well-informed source,

> this article represents a Soviet commitment to aid Assad's regime in the event of a "reactionary rebellion" on the part of either the Muslim Brotherhood or a rightist faction.[6]

Article 10 provides for continued cooperation in the military field.

The Soviet-Syrian relationship is complicated, and it is not easy to make a clear-cut assessment of its costs and benefits. Assad has apparently gained the following: assurance from the U.S.S.R. of support in the event of a war with Israel over Lebanon (for example, Moscow has denounced Israel and strongly supported Syria's position in the crisis over the April, 1981, Syrian deployment of surface-to-air missiles in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley); help, if needed, to suppress domestic opponents; backing for Syria's opposition to the Camp David peace process; and assistance (or at least benevolent neutrality) in the event of trouble with Iraq, with whom relations deteriorated in the wake of the failure of the 1979 unity talks, or with Jordan, who backs Iraq in the Iraqi-Iranian war, in which Syria sides with Iran.

Moscow's advantages are the following: access to Syrian port facilities; prestige in the Arab world as a consequence of having finally persuaded Syria to conclude a friendship treaty; support by a leading Muslim country on the issue of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan; and a decreased likelihood that Syria will effect a reconciliation with the United States.

Syria remains Moscow's principal partner in the Arab-Israeli sector of the Middle East. Their mutual interest in the stability and survival of the anti-United States Baathist leadership gives the countries a reason for continued cooperation.

SOUTH YEMEN

There is much talk about Soviet interest in the Persian Gulf-Arabian Peninsula region of the Arab world, especially after the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December, 1979, brought Soviet troops to within 300 miles of the Arabian Sea-Indian Ocean. However, most Arab countries in this sector of the Middle East are potential rather than actual targets of opportunity, with the exception of Iraq and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), which has had extensive experience with the Soviet Union.

Moscow recognized the new government of South

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[3] *Pravda*, July 16, 1976.

[4] Robert Rand, "Assad in Moscow," Radio Liberty Research, RL 217/78 (October 5, 1978), p. 2.

[5] For the text of the treaty, see *Foreign Broadcast Information Service/U.S.S.R. International Affairs*, October 9, 1980, H6-H8.

[6] *Middle-East Intelligence Survey*, vol. 8, no. 14 (October 16-31, 1980), p. 111.

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Yemen, as the PDRY was initially known, immediately on its establishment on November 30, 1967. Support developed slowly, and chiefly as a reaction to China's efforts. Thus, in 1971, Soviet aid totaled less than $30 million annually. The watershed in the U.S.S.R.-PDRY relationship was the visit of PDRY President Rubbayi Ali to the Soviet Union in November, 1972.

Fearful that the neighboring conservative regimes in Saudi Arabia, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), and Oman might seek to depose it, the PDRY's Marxist government (the only one in the Arab world) sought a closer connection with Moscow. It also wanted backing for the insurrection it was generating in the Dhofar province of Oman. Defense Minister Ali Nasir Mohammad's visit to Moscow in March, 1973, resulted in a substantial increase in Soviet military aid and greater Soviet involvement in oil exploration, party-to-party exchanges, and economic activities. The more radical the PDRY's policy became, the more isolated it became in the Arab world, and the more the PDRY's leadership was forced to rely on Moscow.

With the failure of the Dhofari rebellion by 1976 (largely because the Shah of Iran interceded on the side of the beleaguered Sultan of Oman), Saudi Arabia started to dangle financial subsidies before Rubbayi Ali, hoping to wean him away from the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, Moscow reacted by intriguing with his more doctrinaire colleague and key rival, Fatah Ismail.

Rubbayi Ali's reconciliation with Saudi Arabia and unity talks with the Yemen Arab Republic ended when the latter's President, Ibrahim al-Hamdi, was assassinated in the fall of 1977, two days before he was due in Aden for reunification talks. In June, 1978, a series of arcane and bloody events brought Fatah Ismail to power and cost Rubbayi Ali his life. The Soviet role in these developments remains a matter for speculation.

Under Fatah Ismail, the pro-Moscow Marxist-Leninist faction gained control over the United Political Organization/National Front, the umbrella organization established in October, 1975, to unify the main radical parties. In October, 1978, Ismail dissolved the UPONF and created a new party, the Yemeni Socialist party, his aim being to further revolutionary transformation at home and draw even closer to the Soviet bloc abroad. A year later, on October 25, 1979, during a trip to Moscow, he signed a 15-year treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union. The treaty signified the leaders' desire "to strengthen the unbreakable friendship betweeen the two countries and steadily develop political relations and . . . cooperation."

A bloodless coup in April, 1980, toppled Fatah Ismail, but Soviet-PDRY relations remained close. The new Yemeni leader of the party and government, Ali Nasir Mohammad, traveled to the Soviet Union and was warmly received the following month. There are even indications that Moscow prefers to deal with him, because he is less doctrinaire and less threatening to his neighbors.

Moscow quickly adapted to the new situation, intent on preserving the considerable benefits that it has acquired in the PDRY in recent years. First, the PDRY is a strategic point on any geopolitical map. It commands access to the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, and its port of Aden is the best in that part of the world. Moscow has been granted access to Aden and the use of nearby air bases. The massive Soviet airlift of arms to Ethiopia in 1977-1978 was immeasurably facilitated because of free Soviet access to the PDRY's bases. In addition, Moscow has been permitted major repair, storage and communications facilities.

Second, the Soviet military use the airfields to fly missions over the Indian Ocean-Red Sea basin, gathering intelligence on United States naval activities. Aerial reconnaissance is a valuable complement to the data collected as a result of spying from space satellites.

Third, the Soviet presence on the Arabian Peninsula is a tangible reminder to Saudi Arabia of Moscow's disruptive, or mediatory, potential. For example, in February-March, 1979, during the outbreak of fighting between the two Yemens, the Soviet Union supplied arms to both sides, more with a view toward safeguarding its relationship with each than with helping one side defeat the other. Moscow hopes that Riyadh's concern over the Yemeni threat may eventually induce the Saudis to normalize relations with the U.S.S.R.

Finally, Soviet aid to the PDRY has helped keep a revolutionary, anti-American regime in power and has demonstrated Moscow's support for "progressive" regimes. It is enough for Moscow that the PDRY pursues policies that are generally antithetical to the interests of the United States.

LIBYA

The Soviet-Libyan relationship developed gradually. After Colonel Muammar Qadaffi seized power on September 1, 1969, Libya began purchasing weapons from the Soviet Union, though the relationship was kept to a minimum. It was from Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser, Qadaffi's political inspiration and guru, that Qadaffi learned the policy of diversifying arms suppliers.

Qadaffi's attitude shifted after the 1973 October War, when he quarreled with Sadat over the conduct of the war and Egypt's subsequent abrupt turn to the United States. In May, 1974, a Libyan delegation headed by Abdel Salaam Jalloud, the number two

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Assures Morocco of U.S. aid

Rabat, Morocco (AP)—A United States military delegation led by Assistant Defense Secretary Francis J. West Jr. yesterday assured American backing for Morocco in its war against the Marxist-led Polisario guerrilla movement.

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man on the all-powerful Revolutionary Command Council, concluded a major arms agreement in Moscow. The joint communiqué, signed at the end of the visit, also established an intergovernmental committee to expand trade and technical cooperation and identified a commonality of interest against "imperialism, Zionism, and reaction," code words signifying opposition to the United Staes and to all efforts to negotiate a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Soon thereafter, Moscow shipped enormous quantities of advanced weaponry to Libya, and many Soviet and East European advisers and technicians. Several considerations entered into Soviet calculations. First, as a result of the leap-frogging of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil prices, Libya could pay for the weapons in hard currency, which Moscow needed to help finance its imports of technology and grain from the West. Second, Libya's need for Soviet assistance in learning how to use the weapons paved the way for the establishment of a broad-based Soviet presence in Libya. The relationship with Libya has also provided the Soviet navy with some access to port privileges, which it lacked after Sadat terminated all Soviet military privileges in Egypt in March, 1976.

Third, Libya's hostility to United States peace initiatives in the Middle East aligned Moscow with the anti-Western coalition of Arab states and gave it a role in Arab-world politics. Qadaffi's radical line suited the Soviet objective of exacerbating and exploiting regional rivalries. Finally, Libya's dependence on the Soviet protective shield enabled Moscow to entrench itself on the North African littoral. In a real sense, it is Moscow that makes Qadaffi's machinating in central Africa and international terrorism possible. For example, Qadaffi's support for the Ethiopian revolution, his attempts to prop up Idi Amin's genocidal regime in Uganda, and his intriguing in Chad all depended in large measure on the crucial assistance and support of the Soviet Union.

For the moment, Qadaffi has not granted the Soviets any unrestricted military bases in Libya, but Moscow is obviously building for the future and adapts to unfolding opportunities. Its support was doubtless one of the factors that restrained the Egyptians from pressing their punitive attacks on Libyan military facilities in August, 1977. Moscow may have hoped these attacks would make Qadaffi more amendable to an expanded Soviet bloc presence (East Germans, for example, already serve as his palace guards), which would be recompense enough.

Qadaffi has made several visits to the Soviet Union, most recently in late April, 1981. The arms relationship is quite extensive. However, Qadaffi is erratic, capricious and unpredictable—not at all the kind of leader on whom Moscow likes to pin its hopes. The convergence of interests keeps the two sides engaged but wary; and Moscow hopes to be well positioned to take advantage of any sudden upheaval that may bring about a change of leadership in Libya.

OBSERVATIONS

Soviet support for the Arab confrontation states has been openhanded and consistent, enabling them to oppose the Camp David peace process, the Egyptian-Israeli reconciliation, and the United States quest for military bases in the area. In the short term, the benefits often redound more to the advantage of the local recipients of Soviet aid than to Moscow itself; however, on occasion, the Soviet leadership obtains a dividend, most recently, on the issue of Afghanistan.

Moscow's Arab clients—Syria's Assad, the PLO's Arafat and the PDRY's Ali Nasir Mohammad—have frustrated the Muslim world's efforts to mount a strong campaign against Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. For example, at the Islamic summit conference in Taif, Saudi Arabia, in January, 1981, the Saudis were unable to organize a consensus for their strong declaration that had been designed to please the administration of United States President Ronald Reagan. The Saudis were hoping that their resolution would lead the United States to accede to their wishes on Israel and that it would unify all Muslims against the U.S.S.R.

The resolution, calling on Moscow to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan and permit the Afghan people to choose their own government, was undermined by Yasir Arafat. His pay-off to Moscow for its support of the PLO was evident in his suggestion, which prevailed over the Saudi proposal:

> We believe that it is both necessary and useful that we work with the Soviet Union so that we can reduce tension in that part of the Islamic world in such a way as to ensure Afghanistan's independence, nonalignment, and good relations with its neighboring states. We should accept the assurances of our friends in the Soviet Union that the presence of Soviet military forces in Afghanistan is a temporary matter and that Soviet forces will be withdrawn at the appropriate time.[7]

The Soviet aim in the Arab world is primarily to undermine the strategic-economic position of the United States. It is this that impels Soviet activism and ambitions in the area. ■